

**At Home with Jane Austen:
Imagining the Colonial Connection in *Mansfield Park***

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Abstract: This article examines Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* in the context of the complex relationship between imaginative literature and the experience of empire. Specifically, it argues that the way Austen's novel plays with the imperial experience is more ambivalent than many critics have indicated. It suggests that underlying the imaginative conceptualization of the relations between metropole and colony are certain evasions and contradictions in which the novel consciously abounds. A close reading of the novel demonstrates how issues related to metropole and colony may be articulated within the literary mainstream, and why such narrative articulation is important.

Keywords: postcolonialism?; imaginative; literature?; ideology

1. Introduction

Imperial culture, for a writer of fiction, can be a double-edged sword. Surely, as Edward Said ([1993] 2004) argues, English – the literary tradition and the conjoined academic discourse – often endorsed colonial policy and sanctioned further imperial undertakings. However, as Raymond Williams (1973: 281) contends, literary production was best understood in the broader context of the relationship between metropole and colony, whose impact on the English imagination “ha[s] gone deeper than can easily be traced.” This is not to say that every single idea or image within the body of work produced in Britain was consciously, or unconsciously, affected by the colonial experience. Nor is it to suggest that English literature is, or was in itself, an imperial venture. Rather, the argument about the ideological function of English writing implies that social and political matters are inextricable from the imaginative conceptualization of human experience. While the process of cultural transformation worked on a reciprocal basis, imaginative literature provided a space in which scepticism, doubt, and discontent relating to empire, as well as seemingly disparate elements in the national imaginary, could be rearticulated in light of the demands of the imperial age.

The aim of this paper is to examine *Mansfield Park* in the context of the complex relationship between imaginative literature and the experience of empire. The hope is to illustrate how issues related to metropole and colony may be articulated within the literary mainstream, and why such narrative articulation is important. My objective is to suggest that the insistent inclusion of questions relating to empire and slavery in a text whose main purport is to shape its readers' moral constitution is neither accidental nor insignificant. In my analysis, I will demonstrate that colonial studies provide a useful framework for the discussion of the themes and anxieties dramatized by the novel in question. More specifically, I will argue that the way *Mansfield Park* plays with the imperial experience is more ambivalent than many critics have suggested. I will also explore the contending approaches to the ethical and the imperial that are highlighted by Austen's narrative and draw attention to certain ambiguities and contradictions in which the novel consciously abounds. The aim of my discussion of Austen's ideological and moral affirmations – examined against the backdrop of the ideas of such literary theorists and cultural critics as Edward Said, Catherine Hall, Cora Kaplan, and Kathryn Sutherland – will be to illustrate the centrality of the imperial to the British imagination flagged by the novel in a variety of ways.

2. Irretrievable Truth, Meaningful Contradictions, Historical Fabulations

“Did you not hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?”

“I did—and I was in hopes the question would be followed up by others.

It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther.”

“And I longed to do it—but there was such a dead silence!” (Austen [1814] 1996: 184)

A strong interest in the relation of Austen’s novel to the debate on colonial slavery has recently celebrated its fifteenth birthday. A decade and a half after its ideological complexity went public – with Edward Said’s (1993) *Culture and Imperialism* – we can look back on what has unquestionably consolidated into an important factor in the analyses of *Mansfield Park*, a field of inquiry yielding an ever increasing range of ideas to the theoretical foundations of the discussion sparked by Joseph Lew’s (1994) “‘That Abominable Traffic’: *Mansfield Park* and the Dynamics of Slavery,” Brian Southam’s (1995) “The Silence of the Bertrams,” Deidre Lynch’s (1996) *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, Michael Karounos’ (2004) “Ordination and Revolution at Mansfield Park,” June Sturrock’s (2006) “Money, Morals, and Mansfield Park: The West Indies Revisited,” and Cora Kaplan’s (2007) “Imagining Empire: History, Fantasy and Literature,” among others. The combined efforts of these and other authors have signalled what has come to be perceived and referred to as a “turn to history” in literary studies, and have stressed the importance of integrating the literary with social and political history. At the same time, one of the key issues raised by literary critics with respect to *Mansfield Park* is the plurality and incompatibility of the ideological assertions dramatized in the text. The point was consummately formulated by Kathryn Sutherland (1996: xi): “[This is] Austen’s most designed and designing novel, its ideological programme is both oppressive and puzzling, insistent and yet difficult to pin down.” The text of the novel foregrounds the radical ambiguity of the relationship between home and empire and, in its representations of Antigua, remains complicitous with the dominant metropolitan view of the colony even while undermining both this and attendant ideological presuppositions.

In *Mansfield Park* the primary instance of a meaningful contradiction lies in the uncertain origins of the Bertrams’ wealth. Sir Thomas, we learn, is a baronet and a Member of Parliament, enjoying “all the comforts and consequences of a handsome house and a large income” on account of his high standing (Austen 1996: 5). And yet, whether Sir Thomas is the first baronet or one in a long line of hereditary successors is the question which ultimately remains unanswered. Moreover, the position of the Mansfield Park household itself seems quite baffling: it is a “modern-built house,” deserving of inclusion “in any collection of engravings of gentleman’s seats in the kingdom,” however, without a doubt not yet included (1996: 45-46). This, coupled with Sir Thomas’s anxiousness to secure a marriage alliance with the more established Rushworth family – an alliance “so unquestionably advantageous,” and one which would bring him “an addition of respectability and influence” – strongly suggests a sense of unease at the bottom of his domestic dealings and reveals a certain precariousness of the Bertrams’ position which may, in turn, indicate a newly acquired, and not yet reliable social rank (1996: 38, 187). “What remains intriguingly unclear throughout the novel,” Sutherland (1996: xxvii) says, “is the nature of the Bertrams’ family identity, and how the details we are given mediate between self-representation, or how things seem, and how they in fact are.” Is this, she asks, “an old-established landed élite, a linearly ordered family drawing its strength exteriorly; or is it a ‘new,’ commercial family, inward-looking and defensive, still finding its public position”? Notwithstanding the doubts as to the exact nature of the family’s social status, the house itself, we might venture, may have been built on the economics of slavery. Sir Thomas’s Antiguan estate, in all probability a reference to sugar plantations, figures prominently enough in his economic interests that it requires a dangerous wartime journey for the better arrangement of his local affairs. “The Bertrams,” argues Said, “could not have been possible without the slave trade, sugar, and the colonial planter class.” Thus, he adds, “right up to the last sentence, Austen affirms and repeats the geographical process of expansion involving trade, production, and consumption that predates, underlies, and guarantees [the Bertrams’] morality” (Said [1993] 2004: 1121-1122). However we choose to interpret Fanny’s, or the Bertrams’,

moral position, the fortunes of *Mansfield Park* seem greatly indebted to the use of slave labour and to the expanding imperialist venture. While its overriding concern is with the reformation of the metropole, the novel quite paradoxically flags, without being willing to resolve, its central ethical contradiction.

Taken together, the ideas about the imperial practices that *Mansfield Park* dramatizes do not add up to a coherent theory about the connections between metropole and colony. In fact, the novel's affiliations with domestic imperialist culture are by turns called into question and re-inscribed, underlined and challenged. For all its immersion in the tropes and discourse of empire, *Mansfield Park's* actual references to the West Indian plantations are rather scarce. And thus, we learn, Sir Thomas has a West Indian property (Austen 1996: 7), which is not thriving (1996: 24, 29), and whose poor returns are the very reason for his absence (1996: 31)—a continued absence (1996: 36). We then hear that Sir Thomas returns from Antigua much thinner, extremely tired and weatherworn, though yearning to describe his experiences (1996: 166). We also learn that Fanny asks him about the slave trade, and that his response, or the lack of it, brings the conversation to an end (1996: 184). Yet we learn no more than that. Austen's perception of empire, as Said asserts, is thus "obviously very different, alluded to very much more casually, than Conrad's or Kipling's." She seems "only vaguely aware" of the details of British activities in the colonies, Said ([1993] 2004: 1119) continues, and yet "Antigua and Sir Thomas's trip there have a definitive function in *Mansfield Park*, which (...) is both incidental, referred to only in passing, and absolutely crucial to the action." That *Mansfield Park* draws on the political and intellectual context of empire is indisputable, yet what remains uncertain is whether it promotes or contests imperial beliefs and assumptions—or both at the same time.

Another issue which is closely entwined with the imaginative construction of empire, and one which is explored at great length in the debate about the imperial reference in *Mansfield Park*, is what Kaplan (2007: 194) calls a "twofold lack of overt narrative consequence" leading us back to "the implications of the narrative aporia posed by Fanny's question and the social silence that ensues." Arguably, the novel repeats the deafening silence of the dinner table by not allowing Fanny, in spite of her cousin's encouragement, to ask her question again. Several queries seem to arise at this point. If Fanny's question is indeed, as Sutherland (1996: xxx) argues, a "topical" one, then what purpose does it serve? Why ask this question at all? Is the "dead silence" that greets the inquiry symptomatic of cultural guilt and uncertainty or of the bored uninterest and moral indifference of the other young people? Should we rather assume that the silence receives adequate explication in the tragic insufficiency and inadequacy of language? And, ultimately, how do we interpret these evasions—as critique or acceptance of empire? Throughout the novel, there is no one answer to any of these questions; there are only answers in the plural, and they are often contradictory. On the one hand, it would be erroneous to presume from Fanny's question that Austen's novel actively contests, or implicitly resists, colonialism's social and economic legacy. On the other, we cannot infer that, either before or after the fragile anti-slavery consensus, Sir Thomas was as a plantation owner necessarily opposed to the abolition of the trade of slaves. Ultimately, slavery is "only metaphorically and metonymically figured in the novel," as Kaplan (2007: 205) points out, "heavily structuring its language and controlling its affect but not overtly part of the story."

3. Knowledge and Ignorance in 'the Little Bit of Ivory'

"If any one faculty of our nature may be called more wonderful than the rest, I do think it's memory. There seems something more speakingly incomprehensible in the powers, the failures, the inequalities of memory than in any other of our intelligences. (...) We are to be sure a miracle every way—but our powers of recollecting and of forgetting do seem peculiarly past finding out." (Austen 1996: 193)

The novel's linking of individual and national interests is a dogma in politicized readings of *Mansfield Park*. That Austen's work accommodates both critique and affirmation of empire, Sutherland (1996: xxiv) argues, is a consequence of the very aspect of the novel that some critics regard as its failure, namely, the "centralization of Fanny Price." By means of "Fanny's personal politics of selective remembering," she explains,

(...) *the narrative calls attention to the distortions of subjective vision at the same time as it appears to endorse them. It is Fanny's work to suppress those doubts and criticisms that surface elsewhere in the text. Just as the reader notes that she cannot fail to be happy amid so much distress, so too Fanny's conservative belief in family values is both confirmed and subverted in the outcome.* (Sutherland 1996: xxiv-xxv)

While Sutherland (1996: xxiv) postulates that a turn from the public and external to the personal and internal enabled the novel's "tactical disengagement from history," Deidre Lynch (1996: 167) claims that English readers "invested in Austen precisely because she seemed to snub History as much as History snubbed [them]." Austen's was an age in which people's lives were being altered and people's bodies moved in ways that provided direct contrast to the values that English the literary tradition supposedly nurtured; and yet, as many a literary critic emphasized, "there was no room for them and their big crudities on (...) 'the little bit...of ivory' " on which Austen herself said to have worked. (Bailey 1931, cited in Lynch 1996: 167). "She had some unconscious instinct," Bailey (1931, cited in Lynch 1996: 171) says, "of the truth that individual men and women (...) are the true subject of the novel, and not theories or propaganda of any kind." If Fanny's selective remembering, as Sutherland (1996: xxv) suggests, displaces historical accounting in the text and functions as "political suppressor," it does so because of the inherently political nature of Fanny's position. The investment which the Bertrams are prepared to make in Fanny at the beginning of the novel reflects the prosperity of their overseas transactions. Accordingly, the final union of Fanny and Edmund is seen by Sir Thomas in terms of a substantial return on that investment: "Fanny was indeed the daughter that he wanted. His charitable kindness had been rearing a prime comfort for himself. His liberality had a rich repayment, and the general goodness of his intentions by her, deserved it" (Austen 1996: 438).

The variable focalization of the novel, Sutherland (1996: xxiii-xxiv) claims, together with its "constraining domestic strategies" intentionally "depoliticize" the text's unfolding social and moral trajectories. However, it is in the context of empire that Austen's literary devices legislate the characteristic attributes of the British national mentality. Since the question of interpretation—indeed of writing itself, as Said ([1993] 2004: 1123) points out—is tied to the question of interests, *Mansfield Park*, in the light of its affiliations with the imperial, calls for a type of analysis rarely seen in mainstream interpretations of Austen's other works. While representations of the imagination throughout the English literature of the period often accompany and sometimes even require representations of foreign sites, perhaps the most remarkable feature of literary production at that time is its indirect concern with the place in which it is set. As Michael Harris has noted,

[s]ince the British writers reflect the colonizer perspective on the clash of cultures, their chief concern is usually with their English characters. The subject peoples and their homeland typically perform the role of an exotic background. The limitations of British fiction set in "the tropics" thus speak eloquently about the ethnocentric nature of the British Empire itself. (1994: 3)

Harris might well be speaking about English fiction set in England. "When Sir Thomas goes to and comes from Antigua," Said argues, "that is not at all the same thing as coming to and going from Mansfield Park, where his presence, arrivals, and departures have very considerable consequences." Yet precisely because Austen is "so summary in one context" and "so provocatively rich in another" we are able to "move in on the novel, [to] reveal and accentuate the interdependence scarcely mentioned on its brilliant pages" (Said [1993] 2004: 1124). In this sense, Antigua is a less desirable setting; it is what Said ([1993] 2004: 1122) calls a "usable colony" for local metropolitan benefit, producing goods to be consumed by everyone, yet owned and governed by a small group of aristocrats and landed gentry. As the British share in the fruits of empire, the exotic is domesticated and made ordinary through the naturalizing strategies of a conservative philosophy in terms of which also *Mansfield Park* constructs its plot. Neither Sir Thomas's nor William's accounts of their overseas adventures fail to attract the attention of many an eager listener. On a wall of the east room there is "a small sketch of a ship sent four years ago from the Mediterranean by William" (Austen 1996: 141), and seated here in her personal space Fanny may always find immediate consolation in taking "a trip to China" with Lord Macartney (1996: 144). The empire, as Sutherland (1996: xxxii) suggests, is turned from exotic background into the commonplace. "If the impulse to empire," she says, "lies in novelty (...), then its justification lies in the domestication of the unknown, the transformation of foreignness into home." On the whole, this is precisely the work for which Fanny is trained. "It is [Fanny's] task,"

Sutherland (1996: xxxii) insists, “as her behaviour at Portsmouth shows, to bring good things home, to commodify goodness.” What Fanny domesticates and confines in a politically charged space of Mansfield Park are anxieties, ambiguities, and silences relating to the imperial structure.

4. Part of an Englishman’s Constitution?: Money, Morals, and Mansfield Park

“I wish he may go to the East Indies that I may have my shawl.

I think I will have two shawls, Fanny.” (Austen 1996: 182)

If Shakespeare is a “part of an Englishman’s constitution” (Austen 1996: 312), then so we might argue is Jane Austen. Rudyard Kipling’s war story “The Janeites” – in which soldiers grow closer together in their trenches through their love of Jane – is a clear sign of Austen’s canonical, nationalized status. “That Kipling’s Janeites,” Lynch (1996: 170) points out, “were not fighting, and would never have expected to fight, for a specific political claim or ideology but rather were fighting for [English] Jane and [the English] way of doing things’ was itself reflective of a very English disdain for political theorizing.” What Lynch (1996: 170) calls “the differential grid that established the specificity of Englishness” did so by defining other nations as “at once united and blighted by a doctrinaire adherence to abstract principles.” One of the ways to account for this phenomenon is Benedict Anderson’s (1983) *Imagined Communities* which argues for the novel as the key element in nineteenth-century nation building.

We can indeed view *Mansfield Park* as an important artifact and producer of nineteenth-century English discourses on middle-class morality and propriety, of women’s domestic role within the ideology of separate “public” and “private” spheres, and of the shifting boundaries between elite and mass culture. Yet, Lynch (1996: 98) asserts, “as a result of the institutionalization of the novel in England as well as in the British empire’s systems of colonial education,” the divisions and narrative resolutions of Austen’s novel extend well beyond her nineteenth-century English audience to “the globalized readers and recipients of popular culture in the late twentieth century.” In reckoning with that legacy, we might think of the ways in which the orthodoxy of imperialist venture emerges as a ruling category and terrain of contestation for post-imperial readers. The blending of imagination and ideology, a blending that occurs throughout *Mansfield Park*, means that a reading of Austen’s novel can teach us something about the very notion of ideology with which we would presume to understand it.

Notwithstanding their specificities and differences, the various accounts of the ideological import of *Mansfield Park* share certain assumptions about the centrality of its ethical contradiction. Insofar as these assumptions can be shown as, if not irrefutable, at the very least (onto) logically well-founded, the theoretical positions stemming from them, too, reveal themselves as equally cogent. Probably the most basic among these assumptions is the very acknowledgment of the way in which the novel challenges the values – Christian and conservative ones – that it otherwise appears to endorse. Significantly, it is none other than Sir Thomas, the epitome of imperialism’s “unethical” impetus, who represents the novel’s most meaningful contradiction. A plantation owner on an island “known for its comparatively merciful treatment of [slaves]” (Sturrock 2006: 178), Sir Thomas is one of those absentee landlords whose continued inattention can foster abuses. In addition, unwilling or unable to delve deeper into the issue of the slave-trade during his conversation with Fanny, he is still “well engaged in describing the balls of Antigua” (Austen 1996: 231). The few references to his West Indian estate thus indicate – with splendid linguistic minimalism – the crucial contradictions and complexities of Sir Thomas’s character, which are apparent in all his personal and social interactions, most notably in those in which money or material advantage is concerned. All in all, as June Sturrock (2006: 178) points out, although Sir Thomas “may never be entirely motivated by ‘the sordid lust for gold’ that More, and many others, associates with slave-owners, (...) that ‘lust’ affects in some degree virtually every action he undertakes.”

Certainly, the uneasy combination of moral standards and worldly interest drives Sir Thomas’s actions throughout the novel, as when he prides himself on his investment in Fanny, tries to prevail upon the girl to accept Henry Crawford, or

rejoices at the material and social advantage gained from Maria's marriage. At the same time, Austen flags most of her characters as compelled, like Sir Thomas, by material and social gain. She also represents them as capable, again like Sir Thomas, of veiling their possessiveness in the language of duty. Thus, the role of a woman in the moral economy of the Bertrams' family leaves no room for the merest hint of sentimentality:

Being now in her twenty-first year, Maria Bertram was beginning to think matrimony a duty; and as a marriage with Mr. Rushworth would give her the enjoyment of a larger income than her father's, as well as ensure her the house in town, which was now a prime object, it became by the same rule of moral obligation, her evident duty was to marry Mr. Rushworth if she could. (Austen 1996: 37)

Elsewhere, Austen puts similar statements directly into the mouths of her characters. The one "rule of conduct" Fanny ever received from her aunt is quite obviously on the morality of marriage: "[Y]ou must be aware, Fanny, that it is every young woman's duty to accept such a very unexceptionable offer as this," Lady Bertram says (Austen 1996: 307). Her words are significantly echoed by Mary Crawford: "It is every body's duty to do as well for themselves [in marriage] as they can" (1996: 267), she says, "everybody should marry as soon as they can do it to advantage" (1996: 41). Admittedly, these are small moments and not much to hang the novel's interpretation on. Yet the Bertrams' family dramas spring precisely from prizing "ambitious and mercenary connections," as Sir Thomas himself finally notes (1996: 435). While the Crawfords' is the world of metropolitan tastes, shallow materialism, and conspicuous consumption, neither the Bertrams nor the Prices are free from greed and venality. And so, the young Prices quarrel over the ownership of the little legacy of their dead sister Mary. Worse still, Fanny's discomfiture at the smallness of her family home in Portsmouth is so acute that she feels the need to compensate for what she finds unpleasant in her new surrounding by a series of purchases. Repeatedly posited as source material for competing, and sometimes contradictory, definitions of England as home, the novel may be said to rearticulate the shifting boundaries between conservative ideology and imperial enterprise, between traditional values and competitive consumption.

5. Conclusion

The main focus of academic writing on Jane Austen over the last several decades can be summed up in the term or notion of "historicization." Scholars from all sorts of backgrounds have sought to embed Austen's novels within their historical setting – be it the circumstances of her life, the politics and culture of her time, or the practices of publication – to understand the context of her work. "Few literary critics today would deny the importance of historicizing literary studies and theorizing that process," Kaplan (2006: 192) argues, "[b]ut if one were to turn the question around, asking whether, and in what ways, historians should go about integrating the literary, the answer is rarely straightforward." What Kaplan postulates is that by reading literature historically, with attention to the intertwining of imagination and ideology, historians as well as literary critics can best trace the shifting terms of that connection. In this sense, she echoes Said's perspective on which critics should historicize rather than "jettison" Austen. What these two theorists make clear is that through integrating the literary in social and political history both the story and the interpretation of empire's reverberations in Britain may be greatly enhanced.

"Questions are free-floating whereas answers are not," says Terry Eagleton (2007: 50), "the point is to have an inquiring mind." He might well be commenting on *Mansfield Park*. Indeed, the novel does not provide answers to the questions it raises—at most it merely hints at them. One of the reasons why Austen's text refuses to yield straightforward conclusions is its, more or less overt, ironic detachment from history. Accordingly, I have fashioned my paper around what I think is a legitimate explicatory frame for what such critics as Edward Said or Cora Kaplan intuited most clearly, namely, that underlying the imaginative conceptualization of the relations between metropole and colony are certain evasions and contradictions in which the novel consciously abounds. The purpose of this paper has been to flag some of the most significant ideas relating to empire and slavery that are in play in *Mansfield Park*. At the same time, my immediate scope left no room for bringing up many other significant examples, which might, if examined, further support my thesis. Here

is a tentative proposal, but not an exhaustive one. The novel's manifest involvement in different and differently ideological imaginings of empire and home together with its silence on colonialism's legacy provide, I would submit, a subtle sense of defiance against the imperial politics of other canonical writers. Should the readers immerse themselves in and identify with the charged poetics of empire present in *Mansfield Park*, then the scepticism, doubt and discontent embedded in the novel will seep slowly into their own subjectivities and into their everyday lives.

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